

BULLETIN

OF THE

BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

Volume 87

Number 8

Published : 1st November 1967

The six hundred and forty-fifth meeting of the Club was held jointly with the British Ornithologists' Union at the British Museum (Natural History) on 31st October, 1967.

A. S. Meek's three expeditions to the Solomon Islands

by SHANE PARKER

Received 17th January, 1967

Introduction

Albert Stewart Meek (born at Bow, London, 26th October, 1871, died at Bondi, New South Wales, 1943) was the first naturalist ever to visit most of the main islands of the Solomons group and form collections of birds and insects from them. Before Meek appeared on the scene, small collections of birds had been described from New Georgia, Rendova, Guadalcanal, San Cristobal, Ysabel, San Jorge, Ugi, Fauro and Munia. Apart from making further collections on the first five islands, Meek collected on Bougainville, Treasury Islands, Choiseul, Gizo, Kulambangara, Vella Lavella and Nggela in the Florida group. In three visits to the Solomons he and his collectors obtained at least 2,700 bird skins and many thousand insects, which were shipped to Lord Walter Rothschild's museum at Tring Park, England, where they were studied by Rothschild and Dr. Ernst Hartert (birds) and Dr. Karl Jordan, (Lepidoptera). Many specimens not retained by Rothschild were passed on to such dealers as Gerrard and Janson; this may have been the fate of the missing seventh specimen of the Solomons Crowned Pigeon, *Microgoura meeki*, (Parker, 1967). Thus, whereas the majority of Meek's bird skins passed with the Rothschild collection to the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in 1932, a few came *via* Gerrard to the British Museum (Natural History), London.

The following account of Meek's three expeditions to the Solomons is drawn from his letters to Hartert and Jordan, filed at the Zoological Museum, Tring. These letters are a rich source of data concerning Meek's itineraries, and also contain vivid accounts of the contemporary scene amongst the islands. Apart from illness and desertion by his boys, Meek's main problem was that he and his party had to run the gauntlet of the war

of reprisal between whites and natives. A brutal white recruiting team might land at a village, burn it, and press away suitable labour. The remaining natives would then attack the next white man who came their way, irrespective of his purpose. Some islands were more hostile than others and for this reason Meek never visited Malaita.

The following notes are supplemented in a very few places by information from Meek's book *A Naturalist in Cannibal Land*, which work is more a popular zoological and ethnological commentary than a precise account of his itineraries in the South Seas.

Meek's first expedition to the Solomons, 1900-1901

Meek's small boat, the *Calliope*, left Sariba, New Guinea, on 28th November, 1900. On board were Meek's elder brother-in-law George Eichhorn, Captain E. E. Perry, six New Guinea and two New Hebrides boys. Meek had engaged Perry as he himself was then too ill with blood-poisoning to accompany his men.

En route to the Solomons the *Calliope* called at the islands of Saloga and Narova, reaching Gizo on 10th December, 1900. The following day Eichhorn fell sick and the party remained at Gizo until 15th December. Eichhorn then decided to make for Thousand Ships Bay, Ysabel, in search of a doctor. Arriving there on 18th December, the party was told by natives that the doctor was on Gavutu in the Florida group. Proceeding to Gavutu, they discovered that the doctor had left for Australia. Eichhorn then called on Woodford, a Government official, on the neighbouring island of Tulagi to pay the capitulation tax and to purchase a ship's licence. Directly after Christmas the *Calliope* sailed across to the main island of Nggela, where collections were made at Gavutu Harbour for a month, during which time Eichhorn was often very ill.

On 19th March, 1901, Eichhorn and his party arrived at Rubiana (Roviana), a small village on Roviana Lagoon, New Georgia, after having formed a second collection on the island of Kulambangara. Meek had instructed the party to collect on Kulambangara because the mountains there were close to the shore, and because he had been told that the island was uninhabited. When the party landed they found that it *was* inhabited, and consequently confined their collecting to the beaches in case a rapid retreat to the *Calliope* was required. Meek joined his men shortly after their return from Kulambangara and on 31st March, 1901 wrote to Hartert from Rubiana that he was dispatching on the next steamer the collections made so far, namely 6,367 Lepidoptera, about 1,000 Coleoptera and 185 bird skins.

Captain Perry returned to Sydney at this time, but Meek had increased his party by recruiting two more New Hebrides boys on his way across. From Rubiana the *Calliope* proceeded to Guadalcanal on 1st April, and sailing along the southern coast of Ysabel, arrived at the Florida group on 9th April. The following day Meek's boys did a little collecting on Nggela to show him what occurred there, and on the morning of 11th April, the party left for Guadalcanal, where they camped at the village of Aola on the north coast, collecting there from about 14th April to the end of May. (Some of Meek's bird skins from here are labelled 31st April; he may consequently have been a day out for some time). On 31st May, Meek dispatched from Aola 5,400 Lepidoptera and 309 bird skins.

From Guadalcanal Meek sailed north to Ysabel. He did not specify his collecting locality there, other than that some work was done in the mountains, but it may well have been at Thousand Ships Bay, an area which Eichhorn had called at over five months before. The collections made there produced more startling novelties in the way of birds than any other made by Meek in the Solomons, and included *Nesasio solomonensis*, *Pitta anerythra*, *Ceyx lepidus meeki*, *Podargus ocellatus inexpectatus* and *Accipiter novaehollandiae rufoschistaceus*. Meek wrote that there were three other species on Ysabel which he failed to obtain. The party collected on Ysabel for about five weeks, from early June to 10th July, 1901, leaving the island about 11th July. Meek had intended also to collect on Choiseul, but was warned by traders that the natives there were extremely dangerous.

By 27th July, the *Calliope* was back at Rubiana, whence the Ysabel collections, including 340 birds, were dispatched. On his way back to Sariba, Meek stopped at the Treasury Islands for a little over a fortnight, where he formed a small collection whilst waiting for the weather to clear. The *Calliope* arrived back at Sariba on 20th August, 1901.

Meek's second expedition to the Solomons, 1903-1904

This memorable expedition produced, amongst other novelties, the only specimens so far known of the Solomons Crowned Pigeon, *Microgoura meeki*, and the first examples of the Imitator Hawk, *Accipiter imitator*, not recognised as distinct from the sympatric Pied Hawk, *A. albogularis*, until 1926, by Hartert.

Meek left Samarai, New Guinea, in the pearling lugger *Hecla* on 12th October, 1903, with his younger brother-in-law Albert Eichhorn, his two kanakas and twelve New Guinea boys. Work in the Solomons commenced on the island of Gizo, whence on 24th November, 1903, Meek dispatched 3,067 insects, 256 bird skins and about 20 small mammals.

The *Hecla* left Gizo on 28th November and after six day's sailing reached Tambotambo on the northern coast of Choiseul. Unable to camp on the mangrove-lined coast, Meek based his party on an offshore island. Collecting was carried out on the opposite mainland along a river, probably the Tarapa, about a mile from the base island. The natives of the district were very numerous, and while Meek was there several killings occurred amongst them, though Meek's party went unmolested. Birds were collected from 5th—31st December, 1903.

The second of Meek's three camps on Choiseul, where the party collected from 4th—11th January, 1904, may be calculated from a letter Meek wrote to Rothschild from Yatte Yatah, New South Wales on 29th January, 1929: "I met a man [probably Rollo Beck] in Sydney a few months ago who said he was collecting for a Mr. Whitney . . . and wanted to know the exact spot where I'd taken the ground pigeon (*Microgoura meeki*). He'd already been thereabouts a long while. When I told him he was surprised to find he had anchored there and collected for some weeks without dropping across it." This was a reference to the Whitney Expedition's collecting localities on Choiseul in 1927, when, under Rollo Beck, the expedition called at Moli for 6 days and southern Choiseul Bay for 4 days. The Whitney Expedition returned to Choiseul in September, 1929 and collected at northern Choiseul Bay for 16 days, not visiting Moli at all. This strongly suggests that the type-locality of *Microgoura meeki*, related by Meek to

Beck, was Choiseul Bay, and that the Whitney team, in receipt of this information, revisited this locality for a more thorough, though still unsuccessful, search for the ground pigeon (but see Parker *l.c.*). The holotype of *Accipiter imitator* Hartert was obtained by Meek's party at this camp.

Meek's third and last camp on Choiseul, where birds were collected on 13th—14th January, 1904, was pointed out by natives to Hannibal Hamlin, a Whitney collector, while the latter was working at Taora at the eastern tip of Choiseul in late October and early November, 1929. Hamlin indicated the area of Meek's collecting on his sketch map (Parker *l.c.*) as the coastal lowlands west of the Tuku River, probably including the swampy Viuvomba headlands. It was here that one of Meek's boys shot the holotype of *Zoothera dauma eichhorni* Hartert, a species that remains known from the Solomons by this single specimen.

The *Hecla* was back at Gizo by 16th January, from where the Choiseul material, including over 300 bird skins, was dispatched. Meek began collecting on Rendova in early February and continued until the end of

SKETCH MAP OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS
SHOWING SOME LOCALITIES MENTIONED IN
THE TEXT.



the month. After a few days the party moved across to the Roviana Lagoon area of New Georgia, where collections were formed from about 7th—14th March. Rendova was then briefly revisited and about half a dozen more birds collected there. Over three hundred birds were obtained from these last two islands.

After dispatching the Rendova and New Georgia collections from Gizo, Meek proceeded to Bougainville, then a German possession. Although he should have gone across to New Britain to obtain permission from the German authorities to visit Bougainville, he decided to take a risk and, sailing up the north-eastern coast, camped a little way up a river a few miles south of the Taboroi district. Thus hidden from the sight of German patrol boats, Meek's party collected there from about 9th April to 12th May, 1904.

The *Hecla* was at the Shortland Islands by 25th May, over 300 birds having been obtained on Bougainville. The period immediately before or after Meek's visit to Bougainville may have been spent in the Fauro Islands at the south-eastern end of Bougainville. Amongst the Whitney Expedition fieldnotes, deposited in the A.M.N.H., is this entry by Richards: "30th November, 1927. Tamo, Fauro Islands . . . Our anchorage was between the northern tip of Tamo Island and the mainland . . . Five miles away through the inlet and across a large bay is the native village of Kariki. I rowed over . . . We were given a fine welcome. Sterling, an old man of the village, who had once been employed by an American . . . recalled a man who had once come to the village years ago looking for birds, insects and reptiles. He, like us, had also been on the lookout for a crested pigeon (he drew an outline of the bird in the sand). Although he had been unable to find one, he had succeeded very well in catching a number of birds (evidently ground doves) with lime. This man had remained in the region of Kariki for over a month. The captain and I concluded that he must have been Meeks (*sic*), Rothschild's man." Although this almost certainly was Meek, on the lookout for his prize discovery, *Microgoura*, no mention of his having collected birds on Fauro is to be found in Rothschild and Hartert's accounts of his collections in the *Novitates Zoologicae*, though this may have been because Fauro was not in the agreement drawn up between Meek and Rothschild, in consequence of which Meek may have disposed of his Fauro material elsewhere.

Meek left the Shortlands on 31st May, after dispatching the Bougainville collections, and made straight for Samarai, from where he proceeded to Cooktown, north Queensland, to rest from collecting. Altogether he obtained nearly 1,200 birds on his second Solomons expedition, of which about 800 passed with the Rothschild Collection to the American Museum of Natural History. Most of the remainder were passed by Rothschild to Gerrard, who sold them widely; a hundred were purchased by the British Museum (Natural History). The location of Meek specimens other than those in New York or London would make an interesting and valuable study.

Meek's third expedition to the Solomons, 1907-1908

Meek's intention in visiting the Solomons for the third time was to collect in the mountains of some of the larger islands. Most of his previous work in the group had been restricted to the coastal lowlands; in some cases the

collectors never strayed far from the beach for fear of hostile natives. However, although on some islands the natives were still murdering white men with distressing frequency, Meek found that others, such as Bougainville, had changed since his last visit, and that the number of areas where white men could go unmolested had greatly increased.

Meek left Samarai in his ketch *Shamrock* on 30th October, 1907, with Albert Eichhorn and a crew of New Guinea and Thursday Island boys. He reached Gizo on 10th November, and there received a letter from Dr. Karl Jordan requesting the party to proceed to Bougainville to search for the recently described butterfly *Papilio laglaizei toboroi* Ribbe, 1907. After calling at Faisi in the Shortland Islands to pick up more crew as shooting boys, Meek left for Buin, at the south-east end of Bougainville, on 21st November. At Buin he met the collector of the new *Papilio*, a Catholic Father. With the priest on board, Meek sailed the *Shamrock* up the north-east coast to Kieta, the site of a new Government station, arriving there on 24th November. From there the party moved a little further up the coast to Ameo (6° 16' S., 155° 34' E.), whence they intended to travel inland. Meek carried out a preliminary survey from there, reaching an altitude of about 3000ft., but to his disappointment found little or no virgin forest, a consequence of the dense native population of the district. Only along the coastal fringe was there undisturbed vegetation, the greater part of the area comprising gardens and secondary growth. Meek was unable to collect in the mountains as thoroughly as he had hoped: the native carriers backed out of the journey and his own boys soon tired of making daily trips from the coast to the mountains to return with nothing.

Meek's collection was formed in the Arawa district (6° 12' S., 155° 34' E.) near Ameo (Harawa on specimen labels), from about 3rd—28th December. He was not impressed by the birds collected but obtained forty specimens of the new *Papilio*, possibly from the type-locality, in the Toboroi district.

Leaving the Arawa district the *Shamrock* took three days to gain the Bougainville Straits because of calm weather. Once in the the straits, however, she had to shelter from a violent squall in a tiny cove for two days. The party returned to Buin, where Meek became seriously ill with an outbreak of abscesses and for most of the time stayed in a rented native house while his boys, assisted by the local natives, collected under his direction. Collections were made at Buin from about 11th—19th January, 1908. Meek assured himself that *Microgoura* did not occur on Bougainville, but was told by natives that it was to be found on Ysabel and Malaita.

The *Shamrock* was back at Gizo by 7th February, whence Meek dispatched about 300 bird skins and 4,000 Lepidoptera. From Gizo the party proceeded to the north-east coast of Vella Lavella, where they collected from about 14th February to the end of March. On his return to Gizo, Meek found a letter from Jordan stating that no more collections were desired from the western end of the Solomons and instructing Meek to visit if possible Malaita, San Cristobal, Rennell and the highlands of Guadalcanal. Meek dispatched the Vella Lavella collections from Gizo on about 2nd April. As his New Guinea boys' time had expired he had to ship a new crew, of eight Vella Lavella and five Malaita boys. His ship-

master also left at this point, leaving Meek with only one other white man, his assistant Albert Eichhorn.

After a voyage from Gizo of seven days without anchoring, the *Sham-rock* reached Gavutu in the Florida group on about 8th April. There Meek saw Woodford, who asked him not to visit Malaita because of the danger from hostile natives. Leaving Gavutu on 12th April, Meek continued on to San Cristobal, putting in twice at Guadalcanal *en route*. He attributed the smallness of the San Cristobal collections, about 180 birds and 1,300 Lepidoptera, to the poorness of the country, the desertion of his five Malaita boys and his own illness there. He dispatched these collections from Lunga, Guadalcanal, on about 13th May, then sailed across to Gavutu and on to Ysabel, not doing much collecting but buying turtle shells and native money. The desertion of his Malaita boys persuaded him to omit Rennell entirely.

During the last days of May, on his way to Gizo, Meek sailed past Marovo Lagoon. Meanwhile, within the lagoon, near Sengi, New Georgia, a tragic coincidence was occurring. A trader named Oliver, who had purchased the *Hecla* of Meek eighteen months before, was sitting on the rail of his vessel when he was tomahawked from behind by Marovo warriors. His four Malaita men were also murdered. The *Hecla*, with the bodies still on board, was rowed by the warriors round to Votana on Vangunu Island, where she was set on fire and destroyed. (The ringleader of the murderers, one Ngatu, was imprisoned in Gizo gaol, and died there in the early 1950's (J. Ritchie, *in litt.*, 19th February, 1966).

By 4th June, 1908, Meek was back at Samarai. His opinion of his latest trip was that, compared with the other two Solomons expeditions, it was a failure regarding novelties; certainly Rothschild and Hartert did not comment upon any of the material in the *Novitates Zoologicae*. Dissatisfied with his latest collections, upset by the *Hecla* tragedy, and feeling the need to rest after frequent and wearying outbreaks of abscesses, Meek did no more serious collecting until his Snow Mountains expedition of 1910.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Miss P. N. Thomas, Librarian of the Zoological Museum, Tring, for making available Meek's correspondence; Mr. C. N. Smithers, Curator of Insects at the Australian Museum Sydney, for details of Meek's death; Dr. Dean Amadon and Mrs. Mary LeCroy of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, for sending me a copy of Hamlin's sketchmap of Choiseul and much information concerning Meek's bird specimens from that island; Mr. Ian C. J. Galbraith of the British Museum (Natural History), who, whilst visiting the A.M.N.H., transcribed for me those parts of the Whitney journals dealing with the search for *Microgoura*; and Mr. John H. Ritchie, of the Custom House, Honiara, British Solomon Islands, for supplying information on the fate of the *Hecla* additional to that found in Meek, 1913: 193-4.

References:

- Meek, A. S. 1913. *A Naturalist in Cannibal Land*. London.
Parker, S. A. 1967. New information on the Solomon Islands Crowned Pigeon, *Microgoura meeki* Rothschild. *Bull. Br. Orn. Cl.* 87: 86—89.